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REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON ITS TWENTY-SIXTH SESSION

Draft report

Addendum

Rapporteur: Jotham Antony MWANIKI (Kenya)

Chapter ___. DEMOGRAPHIC, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENT STATISTICS

Environment statistics

1. The Commission considered item 9 (e) of its agenda at its 439th, 441st and 442nd meetings, on 5, 6 and 7 February 1991. It had before it the report of the Secretary-General on methods of environment statistics developed under the work programme of the Conference of European Statisticians (E/CN.3/1991/22) and the report of the Secretary-General on progress made in the development of environment statistics (E/CN.3/1991/23).

2. The Commission recognized that world-wide concern about environmental problems was creating increased demand for environment statistics and indicators at national, regional and global levels. The forthcoming United Nations Conference on Environment and Development was expected to accelerate that process. It was regretted that the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat had been unable to secure extrabudgetary resources or to mobilize other external support for the rapid implementation of the work programme of environment statistics, as requested at the twenty-fifth session of the Commission. The Commission realized that under those circumstances, progress in the development, compilation and dissemination of environment statistics and related co-ordination activities would be limited.

3. The Commission expressed its strong appreciation for the efforts undertaken by the Conference of European Statisticians in the development of environmental classifications and pertinent definitions. Several of those classifications - in particular, of land use, water use and quality, ambient air quality, and fauna, flora and habitat statistics - could be adapted for use in countries in other parts of the world, in a step-by-step approach and after further examination and testing. The Commission requested that the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat give priority to those efforts in its work programme.

4. The Commission, as in previous sessions, emphasized the need to strengthen the co-ordinating role of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat in an area which had been developing rapidly and in which a multitude of actors has generated an even greater multitude of activities. The Commission considered that the newly formed Intersecretariat Working Group on Environmental Data would focus its work on the co-ordination of international data bases and related data. One of the major tasks of the Group was to prepare an inventory of international environmental data bases. It was emphasized that rather than establishing a master data base such an inventory should foster co-operation in international data collection.

5. The Commission noted with appreciation the progress made in the preparation of technical reports on the concepts and methods of environment statistics and in the development of environmental accounting. Several members and organizations indicated their strong interest in environmental accounting, which should be developed as a satellite system of SNA. The representative of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat) informed the Commission of the successful use of the technical report on human settlements statistics in the development of an international survey of urban environmental indicators.

6. The establishment of the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Advancement of Environment Statistics (Oslo Group) was welcomed, and strong support was expressed for the initial work and activities undertaken by the Group. It was felt that bilateral collaboration between a developed and developing country established by the Group was a useful step towards adapting ECE classification for use in countries in other parts of the world. Strong support should be given by the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat to the work of the Group. It was pointed out that such support would require a strengthened ability of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat to organize, service and co-ordinate the different activities of the Group and to ensure appropriate follow-up.

7. Several members described their experiences in and plans for developing environment statistics in their own countries. Similarly, the regional commissions and other international organizations informed the Commission of their current and future activities in that field.

8. It was pointed out that environmental data collection was lagging behind the methodological development of environment statistics. International data compilation should make use of secondary sources of statistics by drawing on existing data bases, especially the incorporation of scientific data, and by rearranging conventional social, demographic and economic statistics.

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9. In response to an inquiry, as to whether the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) would resume collaboration with the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat, the Commission was informed that UNEP collaborates closely with the Statistical Office and the World Bank in the area of natural resource accounting. However, regarding other areas of environment statistics, UNEP considered its role as largely catalytic and did not intend to extend further support to those areas.

10. The representative of the International Statistical Institute (ISI) expressed the interest and willingness of the Institute to continue its collaboration with the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat, in particular in providing training materials, establishing a glossary of environmental statistics terms and creating a network of environment statistics. ISI also invited the Statistical Office to participate in a recently established working party on environment statistics.

11. The Commission stressed the need for experts in the field of environment statistics and requested that high priority be given to the training of national statisticians in developing countries. The development of appropriate tools and statistical guidelines was considered essential. The Government of Mexico and the International Statistical Institute indicated their willingness and ability to assist the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat in those efforts.

12. The Commission expressed support, in principle, for the proposed expanded work programme in environment statistics. However, it was felt that priorities needed to be set in order to obtain a more focused and cost-effective work programme. Activities of high priority should include the co-ordination of international work, the adaptation of environmental classifications developed by the Conference of European Statisticians for use in countries in other parts of the world, a presentation of best country practices focusing on the compilation of key environmental indicators, environmental satellite accounting, and the establishment of an inventory of relevant international data bases. However, it was recognized that even that concentration on priority activities would require additional resources. Such resources should be not only financial in nature but should include high-quality human resources. In addition, the importance of technical co-operation and training and of limited compilation and dissemination of high-priority statistical series was stressed.

Action taken by the Commission

13. The Commission:

(a) Stressed the increasing importance of and demand for environment statistics, needed in support of environmentally sound policies and programmes at national, regional and global levels;

(b) Welcomed the preparation of technical reports on the concepts and methods of environment statistics, which it considered a useful framework for the establishment or further development of national programmes of environment statistics;

(c) Expressed its appreciation of the methodological work carried out under the aegis of the Conference of European Statisticians and requested that the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat give priority to adaptation of the ECE standard statistical classifications for application in countries in other parts of the world;

(d) Expressed its appreciation for the work of the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Advancement of Environment Statistics, welcomed bilateral co-operation between developing and developed countries initiated by the Group, and considered such co-operation a useful means of examining the adaptability of ECE classifications to the conditions and capabilities of developing countries;

(e) Requested that future work of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat should be cost-effective and focus on the following priority activities, although their implementation would require additional staff resources, and noted that the resource implications for those and other activities in the area of environment statistics would be further discussed under agenda item 13 (b):

(i) Co-ordination of international work on environment statistics;

(ii) Adaptation and/or expansion of methodological work carried out under the aegis of the Conference of European Statisticians for application in countries in other parts of the world;

(iii) Survey and analysis of country practices in the organization and implementation of environment statistics programmes with a view to identifying the key environmental indicators that were readily available for national and international data compilation;

(iv) Development of integrated economic/environmental accounting by means of satellite accounts;

(v) Compilation and dissemination of international series of environment statistics and indicators;

(vi) Establishment of inventories of data bases and of related statistical work by intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations;

(vii) Support for technical co-operation, in particular through country projects and training;

(f) Requested the Secretary-General to submit to the Commission, at its twenty-seventh session, a report on progress made in the development of environment statistics and the implementation of the proposed programme of work.